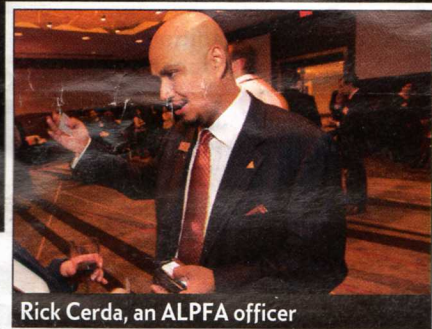


Recession forces even introverts to break out of their shells; in this economy, no one can afford to be shy



Rick Cerda, an ALPFA officer

PHOTOS BY JOHN R. BOEHM

Busier than ever: Solskin Gomez-Krogh, right, president of the Chicago chapter of the Assn. of Latino Professionals in Finance and Accounting.

Like it or not, it's time to network



Mariel Reissig, left, and Rosa De Luna-Frede of Grant Thornton LLP



Melissa Mroz of Crowe Horwath LLP

BY CLAIRE BUSHEY

The phone message just got away from Jana McCann. A self-described introvert, Ms. McCann prefers watching movies with her husband in their Chicago home to chatting up professional prospects. But she lost her job in mortgage lending in May when the company closed. As distasteful as the idea was, she knew she needed to network.

She called a college acquaintance she hadn't talked to in 17 years. The voicemail started OK: "Hi, this is Jana." But brevity was not to be. "Jana Smith," she clarified, only to babble on, "But it's not Smith anymore, it's McCann, I graduated the year after you, I lived with your roommates after you graduated . . ."

Ms. McCann, 38, was mortified. "I remember hanging up and thinking, it was like a panic moment, 'Why did I do that?'" she says. But the woman called back, and Ms. McCann kept contacting prospects, including one woman three times in three months, until she got a response.

"I want a job, and if that means stalking some people, apparently I'm willing to do it," she says. "I didn't think it was in me."

Indeed, a recession is no time to be shy. Illinois' unem-

Job one: Get yourself noticed

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ployment rate hit 7.3% in October, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and networking is the only way to avoid being one résumé among thousands. The need to be noticed goes beyond job-seekers: Businesses are making extra efforts to stay on the radar of customers and clients, and employees are trying to raise their profiles to ensure they keep the jobs they have.

"The bottom line with all of this is, in this economy, you have more competition," says Murray Mann, a principal at Global Diversity Solutions Group, a Chicago-based diversity training and talent management consultancy that works with companies and job-seekers. "You have to make yourself visible."

EXPANDING REACH

The Chicago-based Acquity Group, which provides digital services to companies such as Menards and Kohl's, received as many résumés in October as it did in the whole first quarter of 2008, says Matt Schmeltz, executive vice-president of marketing.

Acquity was founded during the 2001 economic downturn, and its executives have always made networking a priority. This year, the company is increasing its holiday outreach exponentially by switching from paper to electronic cards. Instead of its usual maximum of 3,000 greetings a year to customers, past customers and near-term prospects, this year it will send up to 40,000 electronic musical cards, landing an attention-grabbing greeting into the inbox of everyone in its database.

"That collective community is more important now than ever," says Mr. Schmeltz, 40. "The more of that you can do, the more people you can touch, the better off you are as a business."

Employees, similarly, are fanning their feathers even if it's not their natural instinct.

Scott Navarro, market relations manager in the Chicago office of Seattle-based Microsoft Advertising, has seen an increase in employees selling themselves internally; though there have been no layoffs, everyone is sensitive to the potential. As soon as a big deal is signed, "that person will send out an office-wide e-mail to say the deal was done."

Beyond self-promotion, he says, it's also a morale boost to point out, "Hey, we can still do this. Even though things are down, it's possible."

Solskin Gomez-Krogh, a graphics and marketing specialist at Blue Cross Blue Shield Assn. in Chicago, is feeling reverberations from unquiet corners in every area of her professional life.

As president of the Chicago chapter of the Assn. of Latino Professionals in Finance and Accounting, a national networking group, she's gone from receiving one e-mail a month from an out-of-work group member to one a day.

At Blue Cross, she's noticed that more employees are putting in face time at her division's lunchtime training meetings, where teams report on their work and brush up on what's going on elsewhere in the company.

And she's finding more people asking to connect with her on professional networking site LinkedIn, as well as more frequent updates of profiles: In

addition to buffing their résumés, the changes cause their names to appear in updates e-mailed to their connections, keeping them top of mind. Through the site, people have asked her to meet for coffee, and a fellow member of the professionals' association used it to arrange a phone conversation to learn more about the Blue Cross department where he was chasing a job.

"In the last three years I've had my LinkedIn page, I've never received that type of request," she says.

PEER PRESSURE

Chris Laxton, who has spent 13 years as chief executive of health care association nonprofits, is forcing himself to reach out more. Mr. Laxton, 55, has been looking for new work since he left his position as CEO of the National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage & Bodywork in Oakbrook Terrace in June.

The best thing he can say about networking is that it grows somewhat easier with practice, thanks to psychology's desensitization principle. "It's like if I hit myself in the hand with a hammer enough times, it's going to feel OK," he says.

Still, he stalls. Before returning a recent call from a recruiter, he scripted answers to likely questions. That was necessary. What probably wasn't was spending two hours vacillating between the Tahoma and Calibri fonts for his cheat sheet, then printing the script multiple times

"THAT COLLECTIVE COMMUNITY IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER OF THAT YOU CAN TOUCH THE MORE YOU CAN TOUCH THE BETTER OFF YOU ARE AS A BUSINESS."

[Matt Schmeltz, executive vice-president of marketing]

until it fit onto a single page. "At one point I realized this was really stupid," he says. "I'm spending hours making this pretty when really I should be calling this lady."

He ended up reaching her voicemail.

Knowing he needs an outside force to spur him on, Mr. Laxton volunteered to help lead a job-search work team, based on principles from "The Unwritten Rules of the Highly Effective Job Search," which lays out a structure for the hunt. The team's 11 members will meet each week to share contacts and report back on the number of e-mails sent and cold calls placed, as sort of a support group to motivate the networking-averse.

"You've got to stand up in front of a group of peers and say, 'Well, I only did three (contacts),' and after a while that's just going to get so old, I'm going to say, 'OK, fine, I did 25.'"

GETTING OUT THERE

Sam Fishkin, owner of Chicago audio production company Mix Kitchen, has launched a series of small parties for ad agency employees, freelancers and production people to lay the foundation for working relationships later.

Mr. Fishkin, 48, hosted the first gathering recently in Mix Kitchen's downtown studio and served a handful of sipping tequilas to prompt guests to interact.

"You just have to put yourself out there" when you're in business for yourself, he says. He benefits by meeting new people brought by his invitees and knows that when he helps out others, he can count on their help in the future.

"There is such a thing as business karma," he says. "I think de Tocqueville called it 'enlightened self-interest.'"

One attendee at the recent "Tequila Thursday" was TV producer Kerry O'Tolski, who has found her reluctance to network cured by nine years in a cyclical industry. But Ms. O'Tolski, 36, used to hate asking for help.

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“For years I was like, ‘I can do this on my own, I can do this on my own,’ ” she says. “And you know what? You can’t always do it on your own.”

Ms. O’Tolski, in fact, once landed a job after her grandmother, an 89-year-old Indiana resident, bragged about her granddaughter to the people who drove her to church. Turns out those people had friends whose son

owned audio and video facility Bosco Productions in Chicago.

“Any person you meet could be *that* person,” she says. “You just simply don’t know.”

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